DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 501 CS 200 379

AUTHOR Meeks, Elizabeth
TITLE Introducing Literature of the Minorities.
PUB DATE Nov 72
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (62nd, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 23-25, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *American Literature; College Instruction; *Cultural Education; English Instruction; Fiction; Literary Criticism; *Minority Groups; Negro Literature; *Novels; Secondary Education; Social Relations; *Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a thematic approach to introduce high school or college students to fiction that deals with minority groups. The author discusses how this thematic arrangement of novels may be a useful method for organizing a study of minority groups as represented in major works of American fiction. She discusses the initiation motif as a suggested frame of reference for this study, devoting the major portion of her paper to a discussion of how William Faulkner's "Go Down, Moses" and Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" can be used to illustrate this theme as it relates to racial interaction in American society. The author also suggests some other American novels dealing with minority groups that can be taught in thematic units. These include "The Adventures of Augie March" by Saul Bellow, "The Learning Tree" by Gordon Parks, and "Pocho" by Jose Villareal, and other novels which suggest the value fiction can have in presenting complex social problems in subtle and vivid ways. (DI)e

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

(Meeks)
AB. 4
EJ

ED 074501

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Elizabeth Meeks

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Manuscript by Elizabeth Meeks

P.O. Box 3185
Beaumont, TX 77704

Consultant for Focus Group,

1972 NCTE Convention:

"Introducing Literature

of the Minorities"

CS200375

Bringing the Background into Focus Through the Lens of Fiction

Elizabeth Meeks

Lamar University

Beaumont, Texas

> "How do you write a novel?" the young son of a friend asked Ernest Hemingway. "Do you make it up?"
> "Yes," replied Hemingway, "you make it up, you invent it--you make it up out of everything you have ever known, from all the things you've ever seen and felt and learned."[1]

Wallace Stegner, in "Fiction: A lens on Life,"[2] pointed out that any good piece of serious fiction is collected out of reality and the parts are so reassembled that the construct becomes meaningful. Every piece of fiction, said Stegner, is a reflection of the writer's whole feeling and a trial of the totality of the writer's understanding. But in shaping his material to "create a world" [Conrad used the phrase] the artist bounds the view so as to achieve the clearest vision, for the most inclusive vision is not necessarily his aim.

The perceptive reader may discover that there is not only a Faulknerian world, but a world of J. D. Salinger, a world of Bernard Malamud, a world of Richard Wright, a world of José Villareal, and

---

[1] Reported on book review telecast, Station KUHT, January 19, 1963.

[2] Saturday Review, 33 (April 22, 1950) 9-10.

a world of N. Scott Momaday, and that these worlds coexist with the reader's world. To say that any piece of fiction projects something of the individual author's way of looking at life is not to belittle its representative quality. Claims for the liberalizing tendency of its study are supported by the potential for generalized meaning that gives fiction its power to illuminate life as well as to reflect it, drawing as it does upon the great memory bank of the data of human experience.

A teacher engaged in broadening the cultural range of selections for class study needs to keep in mind the concept of a particular literary work as a writer's personized interpretation of life.[3] The writer offers modifications to the composite picture of reality existing in his time. The value of his attempt may depend in part upon what Ralph Ellison has referred to as ceaseless questioning of formulas evolved to describe a group's "identity, its predicament, its fate and its relation to the larger society and the culture which we share."[4]

English departments now are inclined to design general courses in light of the conviction that Anglo-Saxon writers are not the only ones who offer insight into the human condition. My remarks here are concerned with ways of implementing study of fiction in a general course centering upon major works of American literature.

---

[3] Darwin T. Turner warned against the unexamined generalization that a study of literature helps one to understand people of different cultures and different classes. See "Literature and Society's Values," English Journal, 60 (May, 1971) 577.

[4] Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House), pp. xix-xx.

I suggest that dimension may be added to the study of fiction reflecting different cultures by juxtaposing works that have similar themes and patterns of structure. Such a study may facilitate recognition of what the work of a writer indigenous to an ethnic minority has in common with traditional European-American writing; at the same time it may sharpen awareness of the rich diversity of American society as depicted in literature.

For college as well as for high school classes, thematic arrangement of works has been found useful as a way of organizing a segment of the English program to make clear the relevance of literature to the life concerns of students. The arrangement encourages a study of literary relationships while it permits emphasis on values incorporated in each work and offers angles for looking at social ideas implied.

The viability of the initiation motif as a frame of reference for a unit of study rests upon its being one of the most frequently recurrent patterns in American fiction. A youth leaves the protective influences of home, ignorant of the ways of the world. He encounters dangers; he comes to know the world with tragic and/or comic awareness; and he achieves some measure of self-understanding. His passage from the state of innocence to that of experience is accompanied by consequent changes in the direction of his thought and his relation to society, the process leading to what, for him, is a viable life style. Hawthorne, Twain, Hemingway, Salinger, McCullers, Baldwin, and Bellow are among those who have utilized the thematic potentialities of adolescence.

Within such a frame of reference one might, for example,

juxtapose Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (Signet, 1952) and William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses (Modern Library, 1942), two works that offer perhaps the best fictive accounts of interaction between whites and blacks in American society. Both employ, as a structural device, a sequence of initiatory experiences.

The narrator of Invisible Man, in the battle royal episode, which occurs while he is in high school, is subjected to degredations when forced to participate in a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a symbolic enactment of the situation of his race in the American society, with rewards promised only to be withheld. The initial episode is paralleled by subsequent battles concluding with the riot in Harlem, in which Negro fights Negro at the instigation of those who victimize him to exploit him.

Because of the hero's willingness to do unquestioningly what is required of him by others, each of these crucial experiences is self-destructive. Each period of experiences is marked by a redifinition of his social role, but the definition is made by others until at last, through with running, he rises to an enlightened perception of his human condition. Finally, he defines himself against his background. The narrator, whose race has threatened to deprive him of his individuality, has developed through blackness to light; he has progressed from ignorance to enlightenment.

The situations Faulkner imagined and recorded in Go Down, Moses involve people he created as members of the same family--white and black descendants to the fifth generation of Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, who in the early nineteenth century migrated to Mississippi and there acquired a grant of land in mythical Yoknapatawpha County.

Go Down, Moses, in its several parts, traces McCaslin lineage and recounts struggles, public and private, in lives that carried the fate of McCaslin blood.

The central episode, entitled "The Bear," is an account of the initiation to life of Isaac McCaslin, grandson of Carothers. At the same time that it permitted the author to tell a story in terms that were familiar to him and that he considered dramatic, the ritual hunt provided a framework for the structuring of this and other episodes in the book. Developmental experiences of the boy Isaac are incorporated in the narrative of a hunt for a legendary bear. The boy's mentor in the pageant-rite is Sam Fathers, son of a Negro slave and a Chickasaw chief. Ceremonials in the story suggest the relevancy of primitive ritual, and details of the narrative show parallelism with the schema by which passage into maturity has been formalized in tribal life.

Within the narrative action the boy Isaac is represented as striving for worthiness in terms of qualities learned from the incorruptible Sam Fathers, a man still close to his sources, and from the nobility of life in the wilderness: "Courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty" (p. 297). In subsequent action the man Isaac is represented as unwilling to follow a way of life that seemed to him a violation of these "truths of the heart."

By reading the ledgers of the plantation commissary the boy had learned of the inheritance in human "chattel" that his father had from his predecessor. He had learned that his grandfather, as a master dealing with slaves, had taken a Negro woman by whom he had sired a daughter and had then, by an incestuous union, fathered her

son, whose white half-brothers were his legal owners. Upon coming of age, Isaac made the commitment by which he defined his individuality. He rejected his patrimony, wishing to free himself of the "curse" on the land incurred by the "ruthless rapacity" of his forbears, rejecting the inheritance based on exploitation of those looked upon as less than human.

Both Ellison's novel and Faulkner's deal with refusal to see a fellow being as he is, with failure to perceive his humanness. Both works of fiction embody the attitude expressed by Faulkner that the mere fact of having been created human commits one to the responsibility of living up to his humanity.

Both works of fiction start with the present and give a view of action in retrospect. The "now" for each protagonist is approximately the time of the work's composition, the 1940's. Ellison uses flashbacks to render concrete the experiences that have led to the narrator's psychic state. Having withdrawn into a state of hibernation, he contemplates events leading to his invisibility. The events that make up the hero's memoir have transpired over a period of some twenty years, mostly within the ghetto setting. But the boy had come to the North bearing in mind his Southern grandfather's riddling advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction . . ." (p. 20).

The central consciousness of Faulkner's novel is Isaac McCaslin. "Now" near eighty years old, he has searched the past, including the past of his ancestors, seeking to understand the present. Having withdrawn from the system that had its foundation in a feudal form that exploited human beings, he makes his living as a carpenter in the community of the Southern plantation. Past and present occurences

have been brought together fictively to imply psychological relationships.

Narratives in Go Down, Moses chronicle a changing milieu at the same time that they thematically relate patterns of human behavior occurring in periods separated by generations. Isaac's gesture of renunciation is looked upon as quixotic by an unrepentant community. "Pantaloon in Black" depicts the bafflement of a deputy sheriff contemplating the violent action that had led to the lynching of a Negro victim, who appears a primitive to the uncomprehending white man. "They ain't human" (p. 154), he concludes. Yet events already rendered from the victim's point of view give insight into the victim's capacity for human feeling, his sensibility, and his grief.

Robert Bone has said, "To the extent that Ellison's style is directly imitative, it is Faulknerian."[5] He points to the long sentences and the syntactical devices for representing the rapid flow of consciousness. For English students it would be rewarding to compare the two author's uses of resources of folk culture and the verbal play, including the doubleness of names. Bone cited as an example of in-group humor Ellison's description of the bartender who "sliced the white heads off of a couple of beers with an ivory paddle,"[6] The vividness of imagery matches the scene in the Faulkner story wherein the uncomprehending deputy remarks that in "the same crap game where Birdsong has been running crooked dice on them mill

---

[5] Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 201.

[6] Ibid., p. 199.

niggers for fifteen years," this time the black man reached for his razor and slit the white man's throat "clean to the neckbone" (p. 156).

Both writers use phrases and rhythms that recall the sonority of the King James version of the Old Testament. Ellison makes artistic use of pulpit rhetoric as did Faulkner in The Sound and the Fury (Random House, 1946). The key in which Ellison's novel is written is set forth in the signature at the beginning (p. 15) with the strains of Louis Armstrong asking,

> What did I do
> To be so black
> And blue?

Elsewhere Ellison has said:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness . . . and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.[7]

Faulkner took the title for his work from a Negro spiritual suggesting impulsion toward deliverance from servitude. Thus he invoked associations with Biblical personages and events, which he developed by use of character names, narrative situations, and imagery, as he drew upon the idiom of the spiritual:

> Go down, Moses
> Way down in Egypt land.
> Tell ole Pha-raoh,
> Let my people go!

Faulkner himself stated that the sociological elements in his fiction were only coincidental to the stories of human beings in conflict.[8] But the author used in his stories themes that have

---

[7] Shadow and Act, p. 78.

[8] Faulkner at West Point, edited by Joseph L. Fant, III, and Robert Ashley (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 51.

sociological significance, and historians as well as critics have found that his fiction reflected realistically sociological conditions in the milieu.

Ellison has reiterated Faulkner's ideas of the work of an artist:

> I have no desire to write propaganda. Instead I felt it important to explore the full range of American Negro humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude.[9]

Limitation of time permits me only to mention a few other works that are thematically related. Some of these would be suitable for reading in parallel with works more intensively examined. Within the Bildungsroman tradition one might look at Saul Bellow's contemporary picaresque hero Augie March alongside his prototype created by Mark Twain. Works of less magnitude but still worth a young reader's attention include The Learning Tree by Gordon Parks (Fawcett World Library, 1970) and Pocho by José Antonio Villareal (Doubleday, 1970).

The generation gap as a source of anguish has been a subject of imaginative representation at least as far back as Oedipus. Young people attempting to assert their independence and to find their proper relationship to traditional ways are to be found in fiction not strictly classified as Bildungsroman. James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain (Dell, 1970) has a Harlem setting. Philip Roth's Goodbye Columbus (Modern Library, 1871) presents conflict between parents and offspring in a middle-class Jewish family. Paule Marshall's

---

[9] Shadow and Act, p. 17.

Brown Girl, Brownstones (Avon, 1970) is a story of a generation gap that would be suitable reading for less able students.

A work in modern tradition that shows the youth affected by war and violence is Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time (Scribner, 1958). The veteran returning from World War I finds himself, like Krebs, alienated from his home environment or, like Nick Adams, shattered and disenchanted. The novel by N. Scott Momaday, House Made of Dawn, depicts difficulties that an American Indian finds in the world to which he returns from World War II.

American novelists have ranged widely in their representation of individuals who are estranged. Some by voluntary acts isolate themselves; others through circumstances of birth or upbringing or social discrimination are alienated from the larger community. Hawthorne and Melville were intrigued by the Ishmael motif. I. B. Singer has depicted alienated characters in several of his stories of present-day Judaism. William Demby in Beetlecreek (Avon, 1969) wrote of a white man who constituted a minority at the edge of a black community. Melvin Kelley in A Different Drummer (Doubleday, 1969) narrated the story of a community reversal. Richard Wright's Native Son (Harper and Row, 1966) is probably the best known among a number of novels written in protest against the fate of man in an inimical environment.

Singly, or in relation to one another, many of the works mentioned here demonstrate that a novelist in command of his material can present complex problems with more subtlety and more vividness than can a writer of a treatise on the subject. Without overemphasis on

social content, such works can be presented so as to make their unique contributions to answers to the question posed by an early member of a minority group: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalms 8: 4).